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Self-Discovery through Letter: an Exploration of Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter

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Abstract-- Letter writing as a form of personal narrative creates an intimate space which allows the reader access to the character's innermost thoughts and emotions. The central character, Ramatoulaye, uses the letter as a tool for self-examination and reflection to deal with her internal conflict. The act of writing allows her to create coherence and meaning from events and ultimately to reach self-understanding. The writing of letters provides women with an opportunity to write about themselves in a culture where they are the ones prevented from acting or speaking their desires, the ones left behind at a distance from loved ones, and the ones restricted to a private voice.

Keywords-- letter writing, thoughts, emotions, self-examination, self-understanding

The theme of betrayal and abandonment continued to influence the writing of many epistolary narratives of the 18th century for both male and female writers and even more recent contemporary women writers. This theme again arises in the epistolary novel *So Long a Letter*, by Mariama Bâ. In the novel the reader is introduced to the central character Ramatoulaye, who is mourning the death of her husband, who had abandoned her and their children. The letter that she addresses to her friend expresses the internal struggle she endures coming to terms with the more obvious death of her husband but also his earlier abandonment and then finally her acceptance of herself and her various roles, which lead to redefining who she is. The letter she writes to her friend, Aissatou, helps her to express her feelings of pain and anguish, but rather than remaining the victim, through this process of writing and reflecting on roles, she reaches a position of understanding of her role as a woman, mother and teacher. In contrast to the earlier form of the epistolary narrative of abandonment, the female protagonist does not remain in her position of suffering but instead comes out triumphant. This is what can be argued makes *So Long a Letter* a modern representation of the classic form of the epistolary novel. Rather than prolonging the painful experience of reflecting on experience, as does the traditional form of the genre, Ramatoulaye stops writing when her focus shifts from the pain she feels to her future and that of her family.

The letter novel, therefore, allows the central figure not only to record but also to reflect on these subjective thoughts and feelings. This act of self-reflection forms part of the personal transformation process, but it also reflects the changing position of women in this particular society.

In *So Long a Letter* Bâ reveals the power of the letter in strengthening not only friendship but also female solidarity. The letter novel thus draws attention to the manner in which the mode of the letter assists in maintaining and cementing friendship and bonds between characters' experiences, which is not pertinent to the confessional form. Even though both forms provide intimate spaces for reflection, the purpose of self-reflection and narration differs in some ways. The letter is often addressed to someone specific even when there is no guarantee that it will reach the intended person. The intention of writing ranges from wanting to reveal or to confide personal thoughts and feelings which the parameters of friendship allow. The letter thus becomes a means of revealing the self not only to others but also to the self. The letter could therefore be described as a mirror reflecting the inner self. Ramatoulaye, a character created by Bâ, communicates her reflections to her friend and through this process of writing her letter, reflects on events in her life, both present and past, and draws her own conclusions based on these reflections. The epistolary form is relevant in this novel, as its main focus is on the relationship between letter writing, women and friendship. The fact is that women most often write letters to explore and understand their ambivalent feelings. The character assumes a reflexive stance which is central to her psychological transformation, meaning that through the process of reflecting, knowledge of the self is achieved. Central to the analysis of *So Long a Letter* is the question of whether this self-knowledge is achieved through the process of reflection and how the narrative form of letter writing contributes to the act of exploring the self but also in maintaining friendship and female solidarity.

So Long a Letter is a story about friendship and the complexity of marriage. The view reflected about marriage is that the focus is not on the union of two individuals but rather the union of two families.



And this is often the origin of the internal conflict which the characters experience. Mariama Bâ introduces to the reader two friends, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, through the letter which to her best friend. They each marry a manhood they love very much even though it means defying their families. Ramatoulaye defies her parents when she marries Modou, from a poorer family. In a show of disapproval of their marriage, her parents refuse any dowry from Modou. Many years later in their marriage, Modou abandons Ramatoulaye and marries their young daughter's best friend. In writing about her experiences, we find that Aissatou's life becomes intertwined in these experiences. Very similar to Ramatoulaye, Aissatou also marries a man whom she loves dearly but faces the disapproval of her mother-in-law, who is enraged by the idea that her son is marrying a goldsmith's daughter. The anger displayed by the mother-in-law is a result of the society being divided into a very traditional caste system. Mariama Bâ in particular is drawing attention to the caste system, which affords those occupying positions in the upper caste privileges and status and often causes great conflict between individuals from different castes. The way in which this system is structured is to order groups within society; this often sparks tension and conflict. Penda Mbaw, in research on the caste system in Senegal, finds particularly rigid in matrimonial relations" (11). She furthermore finds that when considering marriage, "one must avoid, above all, mixing one's blood" (11). The fundamental idea of the caste system is that those of a lower elevation are elevated in the career that she brings happiness, whereas thing in her path, like the fire in a forge" (27). This statement expressed by the mother-in-law reflects the many changes that came about with modernisation. The female oral performer, happiness, even though she still performs certain roles at traditional ceremonies, is no longer as respected as traditions start changing. One of these changes was the transition from the oral tradition to the written form.

Ramatoulaye's letter reveals that the two friends react very differently to the events which transform their lives completely. Aissatou divorces her husband and moves away with her four sons. Ramatoulaye, however, decides to stay in her marriage even when her husband completely abandons her and the family until his death. This angers her daughter Daba, who begs her mother to break from her father and to choose the same path as Aissatou. Her anger is not only that she feels betrayed by her friend and her father but also that her mother has been humiliated by them as well.

She says, "Do what Auntie Aissatou did; break with him. I can't see you fighting over a man with a girl my age" (41). Ramatoulaye refuses this alternative for a number of reasons, saying her reasons are her belief in marriage, that she had spent the best years with him, that they had been together for twenty-five years and that they had twelve children together. The most significant would be that she was afraid and felt hopeless, "Start again at zero ... Did I have enough energy to bear alone the weight of this responsibility, which was both moral and material?" (41) The theme of polygamy is central to the novel, for reasons such as it appears to be the origin of the conflict which both women experience. Ramatoulaye and her children feel the pangs of abandonment initiated by Modou's sudden death; however, it also strengthens the friendship bond between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou.

The two opening lines of the novel are written by Ramatoulaye, and it becomes apparent that the convention of writing letters has been maintained between Ramatoulaye and her friend Aissatou. Ramatoulaye says, "I have received your letter. By way of reply" (1). More importantly, the opening paragraph immediately reveals that there is a very strong bond, and one built on trust, between these two friends. Ruth Perry comments that letter writing plays an important role in friendship. She states:

We write letters to our friends to let them know how things are with us, and especially if they in any way relate to them, and we write everything we could say in case we happen to meet them. The perfection of these sorts of letters consists then in their resembling common discourse; that they be familiar and natural, and that they be not only free from the umbrage of the composition but that they surpass it, and that the language of the heart be felt in them (77).

Perry emphasises that the letter becomes more credible not because of what is written but because of the way in which these thoughts are expressed. The language used therefore plays an important role in that in order to seem plausible, it has to appear as natural as when used every day. At times in the text Ramatoulaye addresses her friend in a familiar way, her writing often bordering on oralising when she calls to her friend, "My friend, my friend, and my friend. I call on you three times" (1). By the way in which this is written, one is able to determine the nature of the closeness of their friendship but also the level of seriousness of the matter which is to be discussed.

In the next line she informs Aissatou of her becoming a widow,, and earlier in the letter she explains that the diary which she begins is her “prop in her distress” but that she has chosen to confide in Aissatou because of their “long association” (1). Perry explains that the need to write a letter is often to cope with a situation in which action is desired but not possible. The act of writing is a means by which the writer becomes calm and collects his/her thoughts, and once this state is reached, there is no longer a need to write (116). When Ramatoulaye begins writing her letter, the catalyst for her disclosure is her husband’s death. She shows an awareness of how her writing will alleviate the pain she feels. She writes, “Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain” (1). Her letter not only becomes a way of writing her most intimate thoughts but also a means to express the way she feels about certain events. The self at this point is thus split into the experiencing self and the narrating self as asserted by Bray.

“Ramatoulaye’s experiencing self forms part of the event or experience which she remembers whilst her narrating self reflects on the feelings and emotions. In this context the direct action of writing permits Ramatoulaye a literary space to express herself. However, this literary space is determined by the physical space which has been religiously determined during the mourning period. Perry identifies isolation as being a central element to the epistolary paradigm (116). The Separation self from others magnifies the character’s reactions. They appear more vulnerable and are more suggestible and provide a steady flow of responses to record (117).

Ramatoulaye writes the following to Aissatou about this period of mourning:

Alone, I live in monotony broken only by purifying baths, and changing of my mourning clothes every Monday and Friday. I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail. The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me. I have enough memories in me to ruminate upon. And these are what I am afraid of, for they smack of bitterness. May their evocation not soil the state of purity in which I must live (9).

The above excerpt reveals the traditional views which Ramoutalaye holds and her strong beliefs and loyalty towards her religion. These beliefs have been ingrained in her since childhood baths and she fulfils the expectations and demands without questioning or doubt.

The fear which she describes does not stem from her being isolated nor her religion, childhood,, but rather it stems from the memories and the bitterness tied to those memories which she fears will surface during this period. In the last line of this quote, Ramatoulaye expresses a sense of doubt as to whether she will be able to control the nature and impact of these thoughts. The bitterness which she speaks of is towards her husband, Modou, who is now dead. Ramatoulaye appears ambivalent towards her husband, whom she at one point loved dearly, as she says, “[...] to think that I loved this man passionately, to think that I gave him thirty years of my life, to think twelve times over I carried his child. The addition of a rival to my life was not enough for him. In loving someone else, he burnt clearly his past, both morally and materially. And yet, what didn’t they do to make me his wife!” (13)

Here it becomes apparent that the event which may be causing the bitterness is that her husband chose to love someone else. At this point the letter could go in two different directions; Ramatoulaye laments not only the death of her husband but also that he had abandoned her and their nine children. She could delve into his past and identify the many times that he had caused her pain and suffering,, becoming the “Epistolary Woman” which Jensen describes in earlier letter novels. The novel, however, takes a different direction in which the female character chooses not to be a victim; instead, it becomes a novel of self-realisation and transformation. *So Long a Letter* can therefore be viewed as a resistance novel due to the character’s psychological liberation which takes place. The character embraces her traditions and values but at the same time becomes aware of the contradictions which lie embedded in these. The introspective process brings about clarity as to her present position in society and the challenges it presents.

Ramatoulaye continues to piece together how she and Modou met and fell in love. The transition which takes place in the letter is that Ramatoulaye is no longer addressing Aissatou; instead,, she relates her memories to her husband. This is a significant stage in the introspective process because it allows her to bring to the fore thoughts and feelings which are still unresolved. At this point her letter opens with “Do you remember the morning train...”, and the reader assumes that the recipient she is addressing is still Aissatou. However, in the next few lines,, she speaks of their meeting: “Modou Fall, the very moment you bowed before me, asking me to dance, I knew you were the one I was waiting for” (13).

Apart from his physical appearance, it was also their finely tuned understanding which strengthened their bond. During this reflection on the past appearance, Ramatoulaye speaks of a different time in her relationship with Modou, of a time in which there was trust and certainty. The source of her bitterness is therefore the longing for what she has lost. In this instance she does not long for the husband who has left her but the one whom she first met and had past, and who loved her. Later in the letter she describes in great detail the day on which the Imam, Tamsir (Modou's brother) and Mawdo come to inform her that Modou has taken a second wife. She writes:

All he has done is to marry a second wife today. We have just come from the mosque in Grand Dakar where the marriage took place. [...] Modou sends his thanks. He says it is fate that decides men and things: God intended him to have a second wife; there is nothing he can do about it. He praises you for the quarter of a century of marriage in which you gave him all the happiness a wife owes remain her Dakar,, remaining private thoughts which she conceals while outwardly she appears concealed appeared unaffected. As expected by others, she accepts it as a natural part of daily life. This one comes to know is appeared know it a deliberate, purposeful action on her part when she writes "I forced myself to check my inner agitation. Above all, I must not give my visitors the pleasure of relating my distress. Smile, take the matter lightly, just as they announced it" (39).

The quote reveals firstly the callous way in which Modou treats Ramatoulaye writes, Ramatoulaye, but also simultaneously one is given a glimpse into the tradition of polygyny practised in Senegal. Patrick Oloko, in a discussion on polygyny,, explains that "transformations in society and social behaviour, including liberal divorce laws" have led to a weakening of the economy but that in spite of these changes, "the institution persists, and in some instances, it appears to be the rule rather than the exception" (2). Oloko draws on the work of the sociologist Margaret Peil, who explores and attempts to explain the connection between economic prosperity and the choice of practising polygyny, particularly in Africa (2). Peil claims that Africans view polygyny as a status symbol and that "supporting many wives still demonstrates that a man has been successful and reinforces his status in society" (2). Peil's findings of research conducted in the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ghana and some Arab Muslim countries reveal that although polygyny is declining due to economic reasons, it still appears to be prevalent in these societies for its social value (2).

Earlier in the novel we read of Ramatoulaye's commitment to her faith and religion and her deep, unquestioning faith in God. Here one sees that Modou understands his faith in God as a faith which is not to be questioned (2), and particularly when God decides one's fate. Traditional practice in this instance appears to be rooted in the will of God and is not to be defied. In the words of the Imam "There is nothing he can do about it", which implies in the context of the novel that Modou's fate of choosing a second wife is not to be questioned.

Ramatoulaye describes the internal pain experienced at the news of her husband marrying a second wife as "drops of poison that were burning me" (38-39). Through this reflexive process of writing the character comes to understand and discovers her views on many aspects which form part of the life cycle ,such as marriage, love, forgiveness and even death. Her reflections raise many contradictions which she is forced to confront. Ramatoulaye's views on love and marriage are very different from that of Modou. One learns that even though Modou has hurt her deeply, she remains faithful both as a lover and as a wife. She admits to still crying for him despite everything that has happened; it is something beyond her control. Ramatoulaye considers her commitment and loyalty as the basis of her marriage to Modou and is offended when his brother Tamsir proposes marriage to her. Ramatoulaye rejects Tasmir's offer of marriage because it is her view that it transgresses the sanctity of her marriage. She says, "You forget that I have a heart and a mind and that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you" (60).

This view of marriage differs greatly from the view portrayed by the Imam, from, who is acting on behalf of Modou. Ramatoulaye speaks of marriage as being based on faith and love and not merely an act without choice. She describes it as being a selfless act of giving and sharing rather than one of giving and receiving nothing in return. In Ramatoulaye's view of love Ramatoulaye's love, she speaks of marriage as a personal choice rather than one which is prescribed by God. Ramatoulaye firmly believes in the goodness of love and sees it as a "natural link between these two beings" (93). Through her reflections the reader is able to trace Ramatoulaye's love, Ramatoulaye's growth and development even more so when she admits to Aissatou that she has forgiven Modou.

She writes, **“Yesterday I celebrated, as is custom, the fortieth day of Modou’s death. I have forgiven him” (59).** This is a significant realisation considering Ramatoulaye’s anxiety at the beginning of this introspective process, Modou’s, where she feared the effect of the memories that would haunt her. Also,, it can be suggested that Ramatoulaye’s forgiveness of her husband can be seen as a psychological turning point in that she begins to embrace the events of the past,, and her reaction to them no longer seems to cause her as much pain.

As Ramatoulaye continues to reflect and write about past events and the feelings associated with those events, she also speaks of the changing society in which she presently finds herself. Ramatoulaye’s letter reveals the many pressures of modernisation,, and as a single mother,, she is forced to cope with these changes. She speaks of her daughters wearing trousers because they want to be “with it” (80). She accepts this in a way that would make it more difficult to fight it. She is angry and disappointed when she finds them smoking, and this then raises pertinent questions regarding her role as a mother. She is shocked that they have granted themselves the right to smoke (80). This leads to other questions relating to the impact of modernisation and morality and religion. Bâ illustrates the contrast between tradition and the nostalgic notion of values and morality and modernity that carries the notion of progress and change. This is the dilemma with which Ramatoulaye is faced. In her letter to Aissatou the reader discovers that Ramatoulaye’s values and beliefs are deeply traditional,, and in maintaining these traditions there is often a struggle between that which is expected from her publicly and that which she experiences internally. For example, at the start of her letter, the fear which she expresses is not about fulfilling the tradition of mourning but rather that she should be able to maintain a pure mind while reflecting on the memories of her husband. Later one witnesses her rejecting her husband’s brother mainly because she sees it as disrespectful to the marriage she shares with her husband. In each event which Ramatoulaye chooses to share, there is a personal struggle which she comes to terms with,, and this is made possible through the act of writing. Ramatoulaye makes reference in her letter to the changes in her society which are causing her deep anxiety. The challenge she faces is that she is a deeply traditional individual,, and she struggles to come to terms with the shift in society from being traditional and familiar to a modern world which she describes as “upside down” (92). The internal conflict arises from Ramatoulaye wanting to ignore the societal changes but not being able to do so because this would entail her having to forego many of the values which she firmly believes.

She comes to realise that tradition,, which she has come to value,, no longer has the same hold that it once had. The turning point comes when Ramatoulaye comes to understand that by ignoring these societal changes she will alienate not only her children but also her community. Therefore, she would have to find a means to maintain the self which she respects and values and adapt to accommodate the values of those around her.

The end of Ramatoulaye’s introspective journey is also the end of the letter. Reaching the end of her letter means that she no longer needs to write. The letter has been her device by which she was able to reach the stage of hope in her life rather than bitterness. Ramatoulaye views this reflexive process positively when she says, “Despite everything- disappointments and humiliations – hope still lives on within me. It is from the dirty and nauseating humus that the green plant sprouts into life, and I can feel new buds springing up in me” (94-5). Ramatoulaye’s journey to self-discovery can be seen as a cycle firstly from the present to the past and back to the present; second the catalyst of death becomes the source of life for her and finally her enclosure or physical isolation during the period of mourning leads to her psychological and emotional freedom. The act of writing the letter together with being isolated is crucial to her shifting from a self that is filled with pain (fragmented) to a stage of healing. The letter has become a means by which she was able to externalise many of her thoughts and feelings which she was unable to voice aloud. Also by reflecting on her memories she was able to piece together and identify those which caused her pain and was able to reach an understanding of the source of her bitterness. However more importantly, Ramatoulaye has come to understand herself not only through her past experiences but also through her perspective on love, marriage, relationships, friendship and death.

The analysis of *So Long a Letter* thus clearly illustrates the fundamental value of letter writing to the introspective journey. This has been a journey of reflection towards not only uncovering and discovering but also a journey where growth has come from questioning, interpreting and reinterpreting events. The value of the letter is further reinforced when it is seen as a vehicle of communication, as strengthening the bond of friendship and a means of realising the letter writer’s inner strength and value. Ramatoulaye understands her role as a woman and gains courage to reject certain traditions which undermine this role. Therefore the letter does not only relate events; it is also a means by which the protagonist defines, externalises and reaffirms her views on love, marriage and family.



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The understanding which Ramatoulaye reaches is that her newly defined self and identity are a culmination of her religion, her traditions, being a “New African” woman and being a mother. The letter as a means of communication is significant to both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou because the narration of the events brings about coherence. For both characters the act of writing is triggered by a painful event; for Aissatou it is her husband giving in to his mother and marrying a second wife, and for Ramatoulaye it is Modou’s death. Writing, therefore, becomes their source of liberation.

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